

**THE MAMA BEAR
APOLOGETICS GUIDE TO**

Christmas

(and all the weird things
people say to try and ruin it)



What is Christmas?



What are we celebrating and why?

If you sit in any children's church across the world and ask the kids what they think of when you say Christmas, you'll probably hear a variety of answers:

Presents! Pretty decorations! Family! Cookies!

All of these are good things! But how do we make sure that these secondary goods don't eclipse the ultimate good, the true meaning of Christmas? How do we protect our kids' hearts (and our own) from getting caught up in the commercialization of the season? Well first, we think it helps for our kids to know exactly why we're celebrating.

When we celebrate Christmas, we're celebrating the historical birth of Jesus – our Savior, the Son of God.

The fact that it was prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus was born (Isa. 7:14, Isa. 9:6-7), is something to really emphasize with your kids.

According to Luke 1, Mary, a virgin, was visited by the angel Gabriel (vs. 36-38). She was told that she would have a child who would be the Son of the Most High and would reign over the house of Jacob forever (v. 32-33). Joseph was also visited by an angel of the Lord, who told him that Mary was going to have a child as a fulfillment of the prophecy found in Isaiah (Matt. 1:18-25).

The birth of Christ means that we can be reconciled with God. By His stripes we are healed. He was pierced for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5).

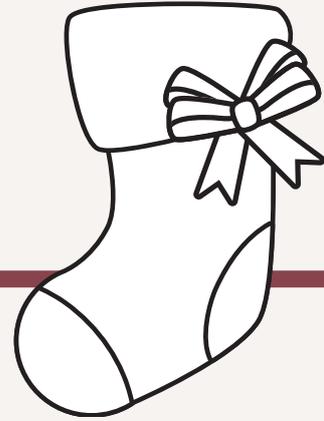
He lived to die – so that we could live in eternity with Him.

This is the heart of Christmas! His life was the true gift.



Born of a virgin?

The whole “born of a virgin” is just for dramatic effect, right?



Many people don't know what to do with the virgin birth of Jesus. Born of a virgin? That just sounds like the stuff of legends. Surely this is just a metaphor. It doesn't really matter if you believe it, right?

Actually, it does. And it's okay to struggle with it, too! Even philosopher and Christian apologist William Lane Craig wrestled with the concept; he flat-out thought it was crazy! Eventually, though, he came to realize two things: 1) not all of your questions about Christianity must be answered in order to have faith, and 2) if God can create the world out of nothing, surely He can also form a baby in the womb of a virgin. That's a pretty easy miracle in comparison to creating all of the cosmos.

So why is the virgin birth so important?

First, let's distinguish important for salvation vs. important for truth. A person doesn't have to understand the virgin birth in order to be saved. However, the virgin birth must have happened in order for Christianity to be true. Without the virgin birth, we are still dead in our sins. Let me explain.

The Bible teaches that through Adam, all sinned (Rom. 5:12). It also teaches that our sin nature is a consequence of being born in the lineage of Adam (1 Cor. 15:22). Think of what the word “reproduction” means: you can't reproduce what you don't have. You can only reproduce what you do have. What Adam had was a sinful nature, and that's all he could ever reproduce. If Mary had conceived in the natural way, the child would have also had a sin nature. A child with a sin nature could never be our sinless Savior.

Born of a virgin?

The whole “born of a virgin” is just for dramatic effect, right?

(Continued)



When your kids ask, compare it to this: Let's say that debt is passed along through a family, and only the family is allowed to pay it off. Your family still has trillions of dollars of debt passed down by a great, great grandfather, and each generation wracks up even more debt. No matter how hard you and your family work, you can never pay it off. Any child born into your family automatically inherits the debt, too. Your only hope for getting out of debt would be to have someone who was independently wealthy voluntarily join your family and pay off the remainder. But who would do that? That's just crazy talk!

Jesus did that! When Jesus was born as a human, He allowed Himself to be a part of our human family (Heb. 4:15), but He went a step further. Through His payment of our debt, He then chose to adopt us into His heavenly family! Now, we are not only debt-free, but we have an inheritance waiting for us!

Our sins are like debt — like trillions of dollars of debt. Our family — the human race — cannot pay it off. We need a Savior who could afford our debt without incurring any of His own. The only way this is possible is to have a child conceived in a way that bypasses the sin nature.

This is why the virgin birth is important.

Date of birth?



Was Jesus really born on December 25 and does it matter?

The church in the early 4th-century set December 25 as the date, but the truth is that we really don't know the exact date of Jesus' birth. Some scholars think that the winter would have been too cold for the shepherds to be outside in the field when the angels appeared to them. Others think that perhaps it is the time when the magi appeared. Still others think that it could have been when the angel first appeared to Mary announcing that she would be pregnant.

The main thing isn't the date when Jesus was born, rather that it happened. Jesus really came to earth. He was human. He lived, He died, and He was resurrected three days after He was buried. Take assurance in the fact that even most atheists will admit that Jesus was a real person. It really doesn't matter what day He was born, but the fact that He was born at all.

Who were the Magi?

"We three kings of Orient are, Bearing gifts we traverse afar. Field and fountain, moor and mountain, Following yonder star." (Lyrics by John H.H. Hopkins)

We don't want to burst anyone's bubble here, but you've probably been singing a lie your whole life. The magi (or wise men) appear in Matthew 2 when they travel from the east to Jerusalem to worship Christ after His birth. Most of the time, children learn that there were three wise men who followed the bright star to the stable to bring gifts to the newborn King. A few things about this event need to be cleared up:

We don't really know where the magi came from, just that they traveled many miles and came from the east. (Matt. 2:1). They followed a star, commonly called the Star of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2), which could have been a planet, but then again, who says the Creator of the universe couldn't have created a special star to signify the birth of His only Son? We don't know how many magi there were, just that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matt. 2:11). Just because there were three gifts doesn't mean there were three wise men. Jesus was likely a toddler by the time they showed up, not an infant like we see in so many modern-day nativity scenes. Jesus was probably one or two. For more about the magi, we definitely recommend you read all of Matthew 2:1-12.



Did Christians steal Christmas?

Did Christians steal Christmas from the Pagans?

At present, there is no shortage of memes and articles proclaiming that Christmas has pagan roots. Some people see these memes and ask, “If Christmas and its associated practices (such as decorating trees and gift-giving) are pagan, should Christians still celebrate?” But hold your pretty little ponies; just because a bunch of people claim that something is true, doesn’t make it so. Before we go tossing our Christmas trees out the window, let’s first take a more in-depth look at these “pagan roots.” To start, what do they mean by “pagan”? A quick visit to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary tells us that the word pagan can be defined as follows:

- 1: HEATHEN, sense 1 (of or relating to people or nations that do not acknowledge the God of the Bible) especially: a follower of a polytheistic religion (as in ancient Rome)
- 2: one who has little or no religion and who delights in sensual pleasures and material goods: an irreligious or hedonistic person
- 3: NEO-PAGAN witches, druids, goddess worshippers, and other pagans in America today.

So, the question is, “Did a bunch of people who had a sensual and materialistic type of polytheistic religion start Christmas? Let’s take a look. We celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December. There are three possible pagan traditions that are celebrated at the end of December: 1) The Winter Solstice 2) the celebration called Saturnalia and 3) the celebration called Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (the “Birth of the Invincible/Unconquerable Sun”). The Winter Solstice occurs every year either on December 21st or 22nd. Saturnalia was originally celebrated on December 17th and was later extended to last through December 23rd. If early Christians were looking to co-opt these celebrations, it would make more sense to assign Christmas Day to either December 21st or December 17th, respectively.

Regarding the festival of Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, it is indeed also celebrated on December 25th. However, the first mention of the celebration is found in a 4th-century document. The same document also references December 25th as the birth of Christ. Since the first mention of either of these celebrations occurs in the same manuscript, it is difficult to determine which holiday was the copycat and which was the original.

Yet another popular claim is that Christians are not actually celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th; rather, we are told that it is actually the birthday of Mithras (Persia, c. 1200 BC), or Horus (Egypt, c. 3000 BC), or Dionysus (Greece, c. 500 BC). The problem is, when you try to track down any ancient sources or documents to support these claims, they can’t be found. There are only multiple modern sources — that cite each other! And all of these sources are dated after the time of Christ! So who is the copycat here?

What about the Christmas tree?



My friend said, it was pagan.

An internet search of the question, “Are Christmas trees pagan?” also yields a myriad of results, each (of course) declaring a resounding “yes!” It is mentioned so casually, that people assume it is an accepted fact — but it’s not. Some Christians even point to Jeremiah 10:2-4 as a “clear biblical reference against Christmas trees”. However, if we read the entire passage for context, it is easy to tell that this excerpt is not referring to Christmas trees at all, but rather to idols that are carved and decorated with (real) silver and gold. Did pagans use evergreen trees in their worship? Maybe. They loved nature. But regardless of the use of trees in pagan celebrations of the past, our present Christmas tree tradition does not represent the blending of pagan beliefs with Christian ones. Trees themselves are not inherently pagan objects. They were created by God. When we put up the Christmas tree and decorate it, what symbolism or meaning are we assigning to it? That is what makes the difference.

The real story of Christmas Trees ...

Our contemporary use of Christmas trees can be traced back to the 16th century German protestant church father Martin Luther. According to tradition, Luther was walking home through a pine forest one evening and marveled at the beauty of the stars. He then brought a fir tree into his house and decorated it with candles, using it as a way to remind his children of Jesus coming down from the starry heavens as our Savior. Thus, Christmas trees were a primarily German practice until the mid-1800s. In the mid-1800s, the British Royal family popularized trees even more. In 1840, Prince Albert (a German) brought several spruce firs from Germany and put them in the royal house.

At that time, newspapers would do drawings of the Royal family. When one of these drawings of the royal family was done in front of their Christmas tree (along with ornaments and presents) people copied it. This evolved into a custom throughout the British Empire, because the people often copied the traditions of the royal family.

What should Christians do with Santa?



Santa can be like many wonderful games in childhood. We love watching children revel in the impossible before they get mature enough to realize that reality has limits. It's part of the beauty of childhood! So for many, playing Santa is just another way to have fun with the kids. It lets their imaginations run wild.

Throughout most of our history, children have believed in magic and then grown out of it as they matured. And parents have always kept the cycle going by passing down fun games for their kids. Unfortunately, this kind of innocence poses problems in today's culture, namely because Jesus is extensively compared with Santa Claus by the New Atheists. (#facepalm) As children grow up, they aren't reminded that Santa isn't real; they are told that "Jesus is as real as Santa" or "Jesus is basically just Santa Claus for adults." This is where we have a problem.

As mama bears, we know that there is a lot of evidence for Jesus, for God, and for the resurrection. But many children are not taught these reasons. God is presented as an invisible man, whom they'll never be able to see, who has a giant book called the Lambs Book of Life which says who gets rewards and who gets punished. Sounds a lot like the naughty and nice list doesn't it? And that's the problem.

In the article "Rejecting a Rembrandt," veteran debater Dr. John D. Ferrer states that atheists "reveal the shallow depths of their disbelief by the speed at which they mention Santa Claus." He states this after almost two decades of formal debates with atheists who, without fail, use the Santa Claus analogy to undermine the reality of God; "Your parents lied to you about Santa just like they lied to you about Jesus."

So what's a Christian parent to do?



We're not saying that if parents play Santa that their kids will turn out atheist or that it is necessarily "unChristian." I know many God-honoring, strong Christian, apologist mamas who do Santa with their kids. Rather, it is important for us Mama Bears to understand what arguments atheists are making so that we don't introduce unnecessary impediments into our children's faith. I don't remember any of my friends crying about their parents "lying to them" over Santa. They were more bummed that Santa wasn't real. I have, however, heard many stories of kids doing this today. The revelation that Santa wasn't real, felt like a betrayal. So if you choose to play Santa with your kids, do it knowing that you might have to one day face this accusation.

While we have mama bears on both sides of this debate, we'd like to mention another option that can keep the joy of Christmas without spoiling the fun: teach about St Nicholas the historical person first and then about all the stories and legends that came after. Make sure and distinguish between the historical aspects and the fantasy aspects. This will give your children the foundation to understand the difference between history and legend, real vs. magic.

You can then suggest that you all play the game together! Let's play Santa! Maybe giving their friends secret gifts, or reveling in the stocking stuffers that appear overnight. Bottom line, it is a fun, make-believe game and they know it.

But (and this is imperative) make sure your kids know that it is your family's special game and that some of their friends might not be in on the secret. You don't want your kids to go telling all their friends the truth about Santa. You'll have some very unhappy parents, which is not necessarily the best way to build community.

Who was St. Nicholas?

The truth is...



We recently stumbled upon a children's book written by Dandi Daley Mackall called *The Legend of St. Nicholas: A Story of Christmas Giving* (Zonderkidz, 2007). It's beautifully illustrated and tells the story of a young boy named Nick who is shopping for Christmas gifts with his dad. While at the store, he hears the story of the real St. Nicholas.

St. Nicholas was wealthy and deeply moved when he saw the poor and needy. When his parents passed away, he used the money he inherited to take care of others' needs. The young boy hearing this story is inspired and instead of spending his money on gifts for himself, buys gifts for the needy.

The truth is, we know very little about the historical man, St. Nicholas (270-343). He was an early Christian bishop from the ancient Greek city of Myra (which is today Demre, Turkey). He is the patron saint of many, but most people probably know him for his secret gift-giving.

You might have also heard that St. Nicholas once punched a guy at the Council of Nicaea. Who knows if this is true (even though it's in a very popular meme and I'd kinda like to believe that it's true)? Maybe he was at the Council of Nicaea, maybe he wasn't. There were several different lists of attendees, and his name only appears on a few of them. If you haven't seen one of these memes, allow us to pass along the story: More than 1,000 years after St. Nicholas's death, a story started circulating that he lost his temper and punched the heretic, Arius. Because of the timing of this narrative, it's not considered historically true, but it is pretty odd to picture the guy who inspired the legend of Santa Claus hitting someone (unless of course it's the store Santa who gets in a fight with Buddy in the film *Elf*).

Santa Claus as we know him is really a combination of the historical St. Nicholas described above, the British Father Christmas, and Sinterklaas, the Dutch patron saint of children. And what about his looks? For that, we look to the famous 1823 poem by Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," more commonly known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas."

What about Merry Christmas?

Should we be offended if someone says “Happy Holidays” and not “Merry Christmas”?



Nope. We’ve heard complaints about schools hosting holiday parties rather than Christmas parties. We’ve heard complaints about stores using “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas.” But should Christians be this easy to offend? No. We shouldn’t.

Is this a sign that the Christian worldview is no longer dominant? Yup. But where did we ever get this idea that being Christian would be the “dominant” worldview? Not from Scripture, I can assure you. Not from early church history either. And most assuredly, not from the Christians in third world countries. Christ said that following him would invite persecution. In the realm of persecution, being wished a “happy holidays” is small fry. Let’s save our indignation for things that really matter, or else we Christians will just be seen as petty.

Let’s think about this for a second. How many different religions are there in the world? About 10,000. Many of them have their own holidays. Our schools are full of kids who are Christian, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, Jewish, and a whole host of other worldviews. Let’s just tackle the most popular ones. When is the last time you told your Muslim neighbor to have a blessed Ramadan? Or wished your African American neighbors who celebrate it a happy Kwanzaa? Or wished your Jewish neighbor a happy Hanukkah? It’s hard to keep track of all of the religious holidays, especially in the fall. It would certainly be easier to say “Happy Holidays” instead of trying to guess what a particular person celebrates.

We know we live in a cancel culture, and we definitely remember the protests against Target back in 2005 because people thought they had banned their employees from saying “Merry Christmas” (they hadn’t). In a culture where people are cancel-happy, Christians should be set apart. Let’s choose the important battles to fight and not find offense in things that ultimately do not matter.

The thing that is more concerning is the potential loss of Christmas in the long run, at least the Christmas Christians should be celebrating. Unfortunately, materialism, not the Lord, is often king during December. If we want to be known for something during the holiday season, it should be that we are unabashedly celebrating the birth of our Savior. We need to emphasize to our kids why this matters.

So, next time you’re shopping and the cashier wishes you a “Happy Holidays,” smile and say thank you. Better yet, say “Happy Holidays” right back. Because if you throw a fit or have some snide remark about it, that’s what they’ll remember. And wouldn’t you rather they remember the true meaning of Christmas, not your attitude?

Idea 1:

I (Hillary) received an Instagram message recently asking for some practical tips on how to keep kids from getting sucked into the commercialization of Christmas. So, I thought I'd share some of my own personal stories.

Gifts for Jesus

When I did a short term mission to Holland, I stayed with a family over the Christmas break. One of the traditions that they had for Christmas morning was to have each member of the family first present a gift to Jesus. After all, it was His birthday! Gifts could be anything: drawings, poems, plans for volunteering with the poor and needy. The purpose was to understand the heart of God as a father over them, and as a lover of humanity in general. Before any presents were opened, the family sat together, read from Scripture, and discussed the Christmas story. Afterward, they each presented their gifts to Jesus. And finally, instead of everyone tearing into the pile of gifts like ravenous wolves, they each opened a present one at a time, and the whole family oohed and ahed over the gift together. This reinforced being others-centered by not just being thankful for their own gifts, but rejoicing in the gifts given to others.



Idea 2:

Wrap presents for underprivileged or orphaned kids together.



I remember vividly something my mom did when I was young. I was probably preschool age, and we wrapped gifts together that were for angel tree kids. I remember a particular gift that was love at first sight. I wanted it so badly, and in my mind, this must be the only one in existence. It was this little stuffed animal that was part elephant, part kangaroo, and part... fairy maybe? It had tiny little wings on the back. I remember clutching him and begging my mom to let me keep him.

She kept explaining that these were for kids who didn't have a mommy or daddy to give them gifts. She didn't take the toy from me. She just kept calmly requesting it back and then had me wrap it for the angel tree. I cried and she hugged me, telling me how proud of me she was for giving up the toy for another child. It was the biggest sacrifice my little 5-year-old mind could fathom. When Christmas came, one of the gifts was — gasp — another stuffed animal just like it! It hadn't even occurred to me that there might be another one out there! This memory is so strong that when I stumbled across a box of old stuffed animals, I gave them all away — except that one. Bottom line, never underestimate the lessons you are teaching your kids by what you model to them. It is lasting.

Idea 3:

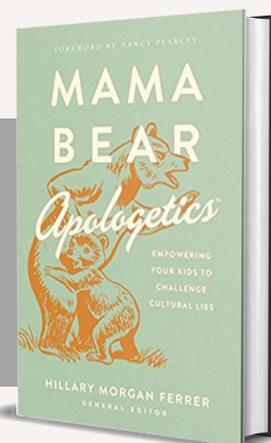
Volunteer together

I cannot emphasize enough how much I picked up on when my mom volunteered. Before I was school age, she did Meals on Wheels. When my nephews did a mission trip with my sister and her husband, their first question when they got back was, “When can we do that again?” Pick an organization and volunteer as a family. Make it a family Christmas tradition! Read Luke 14:12-14 and James 1:27 together beforehand. Remembering the poor and the vulnerable (orphans and widows) is very near to the heart of God. Remind your kids that this is why you are volunteering.

Each of these tips will help your kids remember what the main purpose of Christmas is: it’s about Jesus. And our goal as Christians is to love Jesus by loving others--according to God’s word and truth. You won’t merely get a less present-focused kid. You will be making memories that will last for a lifetime, and building God-honoring traditions that will far outlast your life. What more could you ask for?!?!



You can find more great info and applicable ideas and activities involving the ROAR method inside our book *Mama Bear Apologetics: Empowering Your Kids to Challenge Cultural Lies*.



SO THERE YOU HAVE IT, MAMAS!

Recommended Resources

Craig, William Lane. "Should I Ditch Our Christmas Tree?" Reasonable Faith, 24 Dec. 2017, www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/should-i-ditch-our-christmas-tree/.

LutheranSatire. "Horus Ruins Christmas." YouTube, 24 Dec. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0-EgjUHRqA.

Mackall, Dandi Daley. *The Legend of St. Nicholas: A Story of Christmas Giving*. Zonderkidz, 2014.

Montenegro, Marcia. "Christmas Is Not Pagan." *Christian Answers for the New Age*, http://christiananswersforthenewage.org/Articles_ChristmasNotPagan.aspx.

Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christmas: A Journalist Investigates the Identity of the Child in the Manger*. Zondervan, 2005.

Winger, Mike. "Is Christmas PAGAN? In Defense of Christmas." YouTube, 15 Dec. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugxJBb0IPXQ.

Winger, Mike. "Stop Twisting Jeremiah 10 Because It's Not About Christmas Trees." YouTube, 17 Dec. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFhHmj77_rg.

*Merry Christmas
from
The Mama Bear Team*

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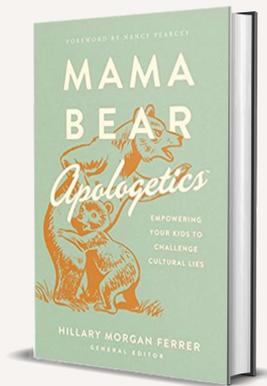


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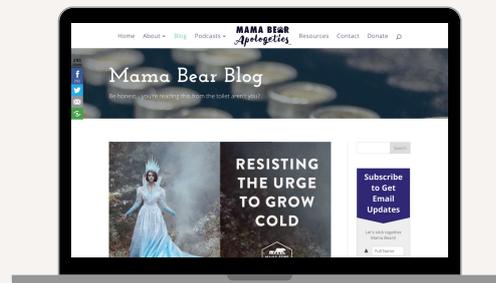


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